

Account of the cruel 1078. 12. 9

M A S S A C R E

Committed by

JOHN PORTEOUS,

Captain of the City Guard of Edinburgh,

At the execution of ANDREW WILSON
Merchant, upon the 14th of April 1736.

Together with

The terrible execution of Captain John Por-
teous, on the 7th of September 1736, in
the Grass-market of Edinburgh, on a sign
post, about twelve o'clock at night.



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*The Trial and Sentence of Andrew Wilson,
merchant in Edinburgh; and — Robert-
son, stabler in the West Port. &c.*

THESE two men were in the smuggling business, and had a large seizure of their goods taken by the revenue officers in Fife; the goods were condemned and sold off. The above two men unfortunately laid a scheme to way-lay the collector with some other officers, and took the money and got clear off. There was a hue and cry after them, and they were both taken in their beds. They were brought to Edinburgh, tryed and sentenced to be executed on Wednesday the 14th of April 1736. Wilson was a well behaved man before this sad affair happened, but Robertson was a quarrellsome sort of a fellow, and none of the best of characters. The Sunday before their execution, they were brought out of prison to hear sermon in the tolbooth church, and in bringing them back to prison, Wilson laid hold on the guard, and would have made his escape, but being overpower'd, he kept three of the guard, one in each hand and another fast with his teeth, and cry'd to Robertson to flee for his life, for he was fast; at this Robertson got clear off, the whole people making way for him, he afterwards went to Holland, and settled in Campvere, and at Middelburgh, where he tricked many of his country-men; at last he set up for a private informer, and wrote to the custom-house officers in several towns on

the coast of Scotland, and settled his correspondence with them, and then he sent them over an invoice of the cargoes on board the Scots vessels, the names of the ships and masters, so that the custom-house officers knew what they brought in and when they sailed, and the excise yachts went out and caught many cargoes, which ruined many of the merchants. He at last got into the same way with the English smugglers and ruined many of them. The Dutch got information of him, and he took the hint and escaped, even to London. Had he been taken in Holland, they would have executed the Scots sentence against him. He sculked about in London for some time, and got letters from those he did for in Scotland, and he applied to that hero W. D of Cumberland, who procured him a pardon from the king, and at last he died in misery at London. So Wilson who bore a good character suffered by the intrigues of this noted k—e. And here it will be proper to take notice of the riot committed at the execution of Wilson, by Captain Porteous, which made so much noise, and brought down the resentment of the legislature of Great Britain.

The case was this: on Wednesday the 14th of April 1736, the day appointed for Wilson's execution, the magistrates being apprehensive that a rescue would be attempted, ordered capt. Porteous, at the head of a detachment of about 70 men of the city guard, to attend the execution, and powder and ball were delivered

to them for that purpose: when without any just cause or necessary occasion, he ordered his men to fire upon the people assembled, calling out to them at their second firing, 'Level their pieces and be damned,' or words to that effect, and levelling his own piece, mortally wounded one person himself; and about twenty of the guard obeying his orders, killed and wounded many others. This massacre was occasioned only by the populace throwing some stones at the executioner as he was going up the ladder, when the criminal had hung about 15 minutes, all which, however, he denied upon his trial, but after a very solemn hearing, he was found guilty of firing a gun himself and ordering his men to fire, and so was condemned to be hanged upon a gibbet, upon the 8th of September 1736. The captain drew up a petition to her late majesty queen Caroline, then regent of the kingdom in the absence of the king; insisted on his innocence, prayed for mercy, and, great application having been made to her majesty for changing the sentence to transportation, a reprieve for six weeks was granted, which arrived on the 2d of September at Edinburgh, occasioned the most extraordinary riot that ever was known or heard of all circumstances considered.

For on the 7th of September, the night before the captain was to be executed, had he not been reprieved, about ten at night, a number of men by surprize entered the city, and

seized all the fire-arms, battle-axes, and drums belonging to the city guard.

The mob hereupon, in a few minutes, locked and secured all the city gates, and, with drums beating an alarm, attempted with hammers and other instruments, to force open the tolbooth door; but failing, they desperately set it on fire and burnt it. When they entered the prison, they made the under-keeper open the double locks of the apartment where the captain was. He begged in vain to be spared till the next day; and making some resistance, they dragged him down stairs by the legs, and hurried him away. This was about eleven at night, when they marched out with lights before them. In their way to the Grass-market, passing by a barber's sign post, some called out to hang him up there; but it was resolved to hang him where the murders, for which he was condemned, were committed. They therefore proceeded to the place where on executions, the gallows used to be fixed, where they kept him above a quarter of an hour till they opened a shop, and brought out a rope, one end of which they threw over a sign-post about twenty feet high. He desired some time to prepare for death, but was answered, They would allow him no more than those had who were shot. They then pulled him up in the dress in which they found him, viz. a night gown and cap. His hands not being tied, he fixed them between his neck and the rope, whereupon one with a battle-ax struck at his

hands. They then let him down, and he having on two shirts, they wrapt one of them about his face, and tied his arms with his night-gown, and then pulled him up again, where he hung till day-light next morning; when he was cut down and carried to the Gray Friars church. Upon inspecting his body, it appeared his left shoulder was wounded, his back discoloured, and his neck broken.

It was observed, that this mob was under a stricter concert, and better conduct than usual; for, marching along to the execution, the unhappy man observing a gentleman of his acquaintance, he gave him a purse of 23 guineas, which he desired might be delivered to his brother, which they offered not to obstruct. They left indeed the prison doors open, whereby several prisoners escaped, but after they had perpetrated this unprecedented fact, they left the arms and drums at the place of execution, where they were found next morning. During the tumult, parties of armed men, with drums, patrolled the different streets to prevent a surprize from the king's forces quartered in the suburbs. The magistrates attending, with several of the burgesies, attempted to disperse the mob, but were pelted with stones, and threatened with fire arms if they did not retire. After the execution was over, they went to the lord provost's house, and telling him they were satisfied, departed, without offering any violence. Nay, it is said, that to do the act with more decency, having no

clergyman, they ordered two of the gravest among them to exhort the unhappy man, as they carried him to execution.

The boldness, secrecy, and conduct of this enterprize, was the most extraordinary instance of its kind that ever was known, the keeper of the jail declaring, that though the persons who first entered and demanded the keys wore leather aprons, they were otherwise well dressed, it made some imagine, that persons above the vulgar rank had a hand in it.

Be this as it would, the insult on the sovereign authority was too flagrant to be overlooked. Proclamations with rewards of 200l. sterling were issued for apprehending the rioters; and when the Parliament met, vigorous measures were taken in this affair. The lord provost, Alexander Wilson, Esq; was ordered up to London in custody; the magistrates were ordered up also to attend the House of Lords at London: and finally, an act of Parliament was passed, to disable the said Alexander Wilson from holding or enjoying any office of magistracy in Edinburgh, or Great Britain; a new provost was enjoined to be chosen, and a fine of 2000l. levied on the city of Edinburgh, for the use of the widow of captain Porteous, as punishments for their respective remissnesses in not endeavouring to prevent this insult on sovereignty, and all lawful authority.

This act, however, passed not without great debates; and as some thought it impossible to prevent a design so well concerted, and so sud-

denly and boldly executed, they were of opinion, that the city of Edinburgh was treated with too much severity.

This act was passed in the 10th year of his majesty, and in the same year was also passed another, for the more effectual bringing to justice any persons concerned in this strange attempt; in which fugitives not surrendering were made liable to death. This act was to be read before morning sermon, in every church in Scotland, every sunday for a year: im-peachers were to be encouraged, and discharged; informers rewarded with 100*l*. sterling, for every person they should convict, and be admitted witnesses.

But so secretly was this dark affair managed, that I do not remember any body suffering on the account; and the reading of the act was but indifferently digest by many in the kingdom.

Great severity was intended, such as the imprisoning, as well as the disquallifying the lord provost for a year; the abolishing the town-guard of the city of Edinburgh, and the taking away of the gates of the Neatherbow Port, and keeping open the same. But the city of Edinburgh was happily saved from this disgrace.

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